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L'espacement de la lecture: Althusser, Derrida, and the Theory of Reading

Sam Solomon

This essay seeks to draw out a conversation between the writings produced by Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida during the 1960s and 70s. These philosophers were friends, yet they seldom publicly acknowledged having read each other's work. I seek to account for this reticence and to mitigate its effects by setting up an encounter between these two oeuvres surrounding the question of reading. My ambition in reading Derrida alongside Althusser together is to take seriously the latter's theory of symptomatic reading as developed in *Reading Capital* while calling into question the desire to restrict reading to the domain of "theory." To this end, I move from Althusser's early statements about his own use of "spatial rhetoric" through Derrida's unpublished seminars on Althusser, finally arriving at a close reading of Althusser's writings on what he calls symptomatic reading.

I. Le lieu de la lecture

In a footnote in his Introduction to *Lire le Capital* titled "Du *Capital* à la philosophie de Marx" Louis Althusser notes that his frequent use of spatial metaphors poses the theoretical problem of why certain types of scientific discourse seem to require the use of metaphors drawn from non-scientific discourse:

Le recours aux métaphores spatiales (champ, terrain, espace, lieu, situation, position, etc.) dont le présent texte fait usage, pose un problème théorique: celui de ses titres d'existence dans un discours de prétention scientifique. Ce problème peut être énoncé comme suit: pourquoi une certaine forme de discours scientifique requiert-elle nécessairement l'usage de métaphores empruntées à des discours non scientifiques? (27 n.7)

Why, Althusser asks, do these spatial metaphors, borrowed from non-scientific discourses, seem to be required in "a certain form of scientific discourse"? This presents a "theoretical" problem for Althusser as he delineates an epistemological break between Marx's science and the pre-scientific ideologies. "Du *Capital* à la philosophie de Marx" aims to account not only for Marx's theoretical practice that produced this epistemological

break; Althusser's text is also determined to account for itself as the theoretical practice that can see this break where Marx could not. Althusser's essay thus aims to theorize Marx's practice of "symptomatic reading" and at the same time to produce his own symptomatic reading of Marx's *Capital*.

Althusser had already defined Marxist philosophy ("dialectical materialism") in his earlier "Sur la dialectique matérialiste" as the "Theory of theoretical practice," as the "Theory" that accounts for the production of the Marxist "scientific" practice called "historical materialism." It is in light of this definition that the appearance of a "non-scientific discourse," in the course of his Theory of symptomatic reading (which should be the Theory of Marx's scientific theoretical practice), troubles Althusser. The "spatial metaphor" threatens to call into question the scientific status of his own theory of Marx's epistemological break from ideology. Althusser argues that science is distinct from ideology by virtue of its ability to account for the production of its objects and concepts as knowledges, that is, as the products of some theoretical practice and not merely as givens. Ideology, on the other hand, takes the objects of which it speaks as given by nature, and covers over the relations of their production with imaginary relations.¹ For Althusser, the spatial metaphor threatens to elide the fact that the theoretical field is always a product of some particular practice and is never simply given to be discovered. The spatial metaphor gives the impression that the world waits, like Atlantis, for science to discover it, or that the text simply lies in waiting for its reading and is not itself inscribed in the practice of reading.

The footnote cited above marks a passage in the main text where Althusser considers the threats of a spatial lexicon of "inside" and "outside," arguing that these terms lose their sense as empirically locatable sites if given theoretical "fields" are thought scientifically. That is, the rhetoric of spatiality is just that, a rhetoric, and he only uses these spatial terms metaphorically. Althusser explains in the main text that the concept of a "theoretical field" cannot be understood as a finite set of objects with borders that separate the external from the internal. Rather, any limitations or blind spots are internal to the field itself. The borders that would "define" the field are not the marks of its finitude in the face of some empirically determinable outside but belong to the field itself as an infinitely definite, structured unity:

¹ Cf. "On the Young Marx" in *Pour Marx* for this definition of the science/ideology divide. In *Lenin and Philosophy*, especially the essay on "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser refined the definition of ideology to designate "imaginary relations" to the real conditions of production.

Autant dire qu'il ne lui est de limites qu'internes, et qu'il porte son dehors au-dedans de soi. Le paradoxe du champ théorique est ainsi d'être, si nous voulons sauver la métaphore spatiale, un espace infini parce que défini, c'est-à-dire sans limites, sans frontières extérieures, qui le séparent de rien, justement parce qu'il est défini et limité en dedans de soi portant en soi la finitude de sa définition, qui, d'exclure ce qu'il n'est pas, le fait ce qu'il est. (27)

Thus, for Althusser, “if we wish” (si nous voulons) to preserve the spatial rhetoric (it remains unclear from where this wish might come), we will produce an impossible topography, one in which the definite is infinite—something like a spherical space whose borders give to no outside. The development of a science (through an epistemological break and a symptomatic reading) changes the theoretical field. Althusser describes this change through spatial metaphors, and the next footnote accordingly registers the same anxiety about the propriety of this rhetoric:

Je conserve la métaphore spatiale. Pourtant le changement de terrain se fait sur place: en toute rigueur il faudrait parler de mutation du mode de production théorique, et du changement de la fonction du sujet provoqué par cette mutation de mode. (28 n.8)

En toute rigueur there would be an altogether different way to parse this spatial metaphor: in terms of the “mutation of the mode of theoretical production and of the change of function of the subject induced by this change of mode.” Strictly speaking, Althusser insists, there is another, more properly literal way to put all of these spatial metaphors; in all rigor, we would not need the complex, even rigorous description of the relation between the inside and the outside. Indeed, Althusser goes to great pains elsewhere in *Lire le Capital* and especially in *Pour Marx* to show how Marx provided us with just such a vocabulary that is not, strictly speaking, “spatial,” when he discovered the operations of forces, means, relations, and modes of production.

Yet precisely in the places where Althusser invokes the genesis of such new concepts (forces, means, relations, and modes of production), in the moments when he accounts in his own theory for Marx's theoretical practice that produced this new science, he always has recourse to “the spatial metaphor.” Althusser tends to resort to this rhetoric especially when he seeks to explain the contours of Marx's (and by extension, his own) theoretical

practice. For example, in “Contradiction et Surdétermination” Althusser argues that Marx does not work with the same concept as Hegel when he speaks of “société civile”:

Sans doute Marx parle encore de “*société civile*” . . . mais c'est par allusion au passé, pour désigner *le lieu* de ses découvertes, et non pour en reprendre le *concept*. . . . Degré de développement des *forces de production*, état des *rapports de production*: voilà désormais les concepts fondamentaux de Marx. Si la “société civile” lui en indiquait bien le lieu (c'est ici qu'il faut creuser . . .), il faut avouer qu'elle ne lui en fournissait même pas la matière. (*Pour Marx* 108-110; emphasis in original)

Even here, as he develops and exposes Marx's novel conceptual vocabulary, Althusser has recourse to the same spatial rhetoric of *le lieu* that he will later, in *Lire le Capital*, say ought to have been replaced by the concept of modes of production and their “mutations.” Civil society is here “le lieu” (rendered and italicized as “site” in Ben Brewster's English translation) where the production of new concepts takes place, but it is a site that gives way to the actual “material” from which Marx's new concepts emerge—this material seems to take its place, so to speak. The essay on “Contradiction et surdétermination” in *Pour Marx* is full of such moments, especially, as I noted, when Althusser speaks of a scientific development or epistemological break. Althusser consistently renders the work of science to produce a break with ideology as a change in theoretical field, as a movement from one topography to another. Concepts take place by successively taking the places of older formations.

At the same time, Althusser argues that Marx has provided us with a new vocabulary to replace these spatial metaphors and, much more important for him, Marx has produced a new set of concepts. The terms (“civil society,” commodity, value) are not the same, even if the words are, because the concepts have changed, insofar as concepts are objects determined by the relations of production within a given problematic. This understanding of the theoretical concept requires that “theory” be thought of as a determinate social practice that transforms some raw material through productive labor. Extending the theory of Marx's scientific and theoretical practice from *Pour Marx*, Althusser additionally seeks in *Reading Capital* to explain precisely how Marx's scientific production of theory anticipates and allows for Althusser's own philosophy, his theory of Marx's theoretical practice. It is in precisely these moments when Althusser attempts to define

the workings of philosophy—as a “theory of theoretical practice” that works through a particular sort of “reading”—that he most heavily relies on “the spatial metaphor.” Althusser is content in this work to refer to the work of theoretical practice—as the production of new concepts in new structured problematics (or theoretical fields)—in the temporal terms of a sequential, successive move from ideology to science, but the relations within these “fields” should not, in all rigor, be understood in spatial terms.

Why this “retention” of the “spatial metaphor” precisely where it should, according to Althusser’s own pronouncement, be denounced? Why does it seem to be needed precisely where, in all rigor, we should be able to do without it? This retention cannot be a matter of subjective choice or authorial intention. Althusser himself says in the previous footnote that a theoretical problem is posed by these metaphors, and a theoretical problem is never, for Althusser, something that can be willed into or out of existence, even if its treatment must be deferred sometimes in the interests of economy. How can we read these spatial catachreses? Are they really so impertinent as Althusser insists? How has Althusser himself taught us to read them, if not in the mode of *une lecture symptomale*?

We will return to the pivotal place of symptomatic reading in Althusser’s methodology, but for the moment let us tease out a bit more the logic of the footnotes with which we began. Althusser insists that he does not lack the concepts for thinking the transformation of the problematic that takes place in a symptomatic reading, yet he continually returns to the spatial metaphors that he will insist are only metaphors, only old names for concepts that could better be described otherwise (in terms of a mutation in mode of production and the change of function of the subject induced by this change of mode). That is, he has, on the one hand, access to a more proper language for representing the “concept of the effectivity of a structure on its elements,” as he later describes this relation of overdetermined contradiction. But he continues to use the spatial rhetoric of terrain, field, space, site, and so on. Hence the haunting of his discourse by the unresolved “theoretical problem” of the “validity of [this rhetoric’s] claim to existence in a discourse with scientific pretensions.” Why, indeed, “does a certain form of scientific discourse necessarily need the use of metaphors borrowed from non-scientific disciplines,” especially if Althusser has, as he claims he does, access to more proper concepts, and if he knows that “we should speak” otherwise (*Reading* 27)? And is his question about the place of “non-scientific” metaphors in a “scientific” discourse really the right one for a

discussion of symptomatic reading? Why is Althusser perfectly content to describe reading as a chronological process, as we will see he does: is time more properly “scientific” than space? In the course of this paper, I will suggest that this recourse to and retention of the spatial metaphor in scientific discourse is an effect of reading as an operation or practice that cannot be reduced to the domain of theory. Any effort to define “reading” as a theoretical practice with definite temporal stages cannot avoid inscribing reading outside of itself, necessitating always some “spatial metaphor” to keep it in its place.

II. Some Public Signs of Reading

The problems that have been raised so far will accompany us on our travels along the margins of the oeuvre of one of Althusser’s contemporaries and friends, Jacques Derrida. The reasons for this juxtaposition of thinkers of reading are multiple. Firstly, leading up to and following the 1993 release of *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida’s first book-length work on Marx and Marxist thought, there has been much speculation as to why Derrida had not pronounced sooner his relation to Marxism. There have been a number of subsequent attempts either to reconcile Marxism with Derridean deconstruction or to facily use one to condemn the other.² But more significant for this essay is the fact that throughout *Spectres de Marx* references to Althusser are limited to one or two comments about “les Althusseriens.” Indeed, Derrida’s response to Althusser’s work remains subterranean in his written texts, although one can arguably read between the lines to find it. By looking at some of Derrida’s unpublished work, I hope to clarify our understanding of this apparent absence.

There is a second reason why an encounter (selective though it must be) with Derrida’s oeuvre may help to sort through some of the problems at stake in my reading of Althusser’s early works. If Althusser is an important thinker of “reading,” and if, as I will ultimately suggest, the place of “reading” in his early works troubles the theoretical system that he simultaneously constructs, then there is no better thinker to turn to regarding limits, borders, and the necessary deconstructibility of systems and structures than Jacques

² Perhaps the best example of this question’s emergence, and some excellent attempts to work through it, can be found in *Ghostly Demarcations*; cf. especially the pieces by Jameson, Montag, and Negri, and Derrida’s response to them in the same volume, “Marx and Sons.”

Derrida.³

Derrida's response to Althusser can be read, as I said, between the lines of his work, starting from some of his earliest writings. For example, in 1966, the year following the publication of both *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*, Derrida wrote "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines." This text forms a part of Derrida's larger project of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence; in it, Derrida takes on the problem of "structural" discourse as both a challenge to and an inheritor of metaphysics. Derrida looks particularly at the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, considering how his insistence on the "play" of "signs" bears the traces of the metaphysics of presence that it claims to do without. There are a few places in this text where critical echoes of Althusser's project surface. Most significantly, Derrida claims that "C'est dans les concepts hérités de la métaphysique que, par exemple, ont opéré Nietzsche, Freud et Heidegger. Or comme ces concepts ne sont pas des éléments, des atomes, comme ils sont pris dans une syntaxe et un système, chaque emprunt déterminé fait venir à lui toute la métaphysique." This passage carries a swift response, perhaps unintended, to the Althusserian project as described in *Pour Marx*. In one of the earlier essays collected there, "Sur le jeune Marx," Althusser makes a point strikingly similar to Derrida's, though his approach and the conclusions he draws are quite different:

Il faut . . . se demander si la présence d'analyses et d'objets don't Feuerbach ne dit rien (ou presque) suffit à justifier ce partage en éléments feuerbachiens et non-feuerbachiens (c'est-à-dire déjà marxistes). Or ce n'est pas *des éléments eux-mêmes* qu'on peut espérer une réponse. . . . Si l'on veut donc bien poser le problème des *éléments* dans cette perspective, on reconnaîtra que tout tient à une questions qui leur est préalable: celle la *nature de la problématique à partir de laquelle ils sont effectivement pensés*, dans un texte donné. (*Pour Marx* 65; emphasis in original)

So, both Derrida and Althusser urge us to recognize that concepts are not "elements" that can be analyzed on their own regardless of the context (system or problematic) in which they are formulated. Yet while Althusser

³ On the question of an Althusserian "system" see also Jameson, who argues, following Althusser's self-critical indications, that the latter's work comprises not a system but a "complex of interventions and polemic positions" (*Lenin* viii). See also Elliott's groundbreaking work on Althusser for an evaluation of the "politics of theory" and a "reconstruction, so far as possible, of the contexts and subtext of Althusser's work" (*Althusser* xix). While I agree with much of Elliot's critical appraisal of Althusser's earlier work, I object to his wholesale dismissal of "apolitical literary deconstructionists" (304).

concludes that the “elements” can be understood “in a given text,” Derrida would trouble the boundaries of “the given text.” For both Derrida and Althusser, any concept necessarily carries with it the metaphysics of presence or the ideology, respectively, of the system from which it is “extracted.”⁴

Althusser insists that a scientific practice, in its production of a new, structured theoretical problematic in which concepts are overdetermined, is precisely not such an extraction of elements. But for Derrida, the legacy of the system and the syntax cannot be erased, even if and especially when this legacy is not recognized as consubstantial with the “problematic which is the starting point for actually thinking [the elements].” It is this troubling of the borders of the theoretical problematic as such that distinguishes Derrida from Althusser here. This difference points toward a profound critique of the notion of an enclosed, “infinitely definite” theoretical field that we have seen affirmed in Althusser. For Derrida, the very act of defining the borders of the problematic or structured synchronic unity can only testify to the metaphysics of presence from which structural discourse would claim to be a clean break. Derrida thus gives us some critical tools for explaining Althusser’s recourse to spatial rhetoric as the symptom of an inheritance of non-scientificity that cannot be closed off or disavowed by the “definition” of a theoretical problematic, as this act of bordering and defining reinscribes that legacy on the spot, so to speak.

These echoes of a behind-the-scenes critique of the Althusserian project are legible, then, in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” and may have been audible to anyone trying to hear them in 1966. So, why exactly might Derrida have avoided explicit reference in his written work to Althusser’s oeuvre? Why not cite the letter of Althusser’s texts (with which he was familiar), even if to critique them, as he did the texts of so many other friends and teachers? In “Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,”⁵ Derrida explains to Michael Sprinker that his relative “reticence” with regard to the work of Louis Althusser sprang largely from the historical and structural circumstances of their professional and personal relationship. Derrida asserts that he had many questions for Althusser and those around him, but that to voice his concerns would have been to place himself, against his wishes, into one of two camps, both of which he found unsatisfactory, to

⁴ Indeed, Althusser goes to great pains throughout *Pour Marx* to explain why Marx’s materialist dialectic cannot be reduced to an “extraction of the rational kernel” of the Hegelian dialectic, in spite of Marx’s own claims to the contrary.

⁵ To my knowledge, this interview has not been published in French.

say the least: “I didn’t want my questions to be taken for crude and self-serving criticisms connected with the Right or the Left” (187-8). In one scenario, he would have been seen as a Communist Party apologist who rejected the “theoreticist” work of the Althusserians:

Even though I was not a Party member, I understood the situation. I knew that the accusation of theoreticism or of scientism could be formulated from the Party’s point of view, for example, and, moreover, it was formulated by them in quite summary fashion—or in terms, at least, to which I would have been the last to subscribe.

The other possibility and threat was that Derrida would be perceived as anti-communist, as attacking the party in a manner that he found both uninteresting and crippling. His reticence amounted to a public silence in regard to Althusser and his cohort. This is not to say that Derrida was without questions and critiques; indeed, he describes his situation as a sort of agonizing paralysis in the citation with which we began: “I found myself walled in by a sort of tormented silence” (188).

In “Politics and Friendship,” Derrida brings to light a number of the places where he would critique and differentiate himself from Althusser.⁶ These criticisms and points of divergence are various, but it seems that, for Derrida, the most troubling element of Althusser’s oeuvre surrounds the latter’s too facile statements about “science”: “I constantly felt, not like raising objections, but like saying: ‘You have to slow down. What is an object? What is a scientific object?’ [The Althusserians’] discourse seemed to me to give way to a theoreticism or a newfangled scientism which I could have challenged” (187-8). Here, as elsewhere, Derrida refers primarily to the “Althusserians” without specifically citing Althusser’s texts or claims (it is an interview, after all).

A related point of contention (annoyance, even) for Derrida with regard to Althusser’s work surrounds the latter’s relation to Heidegger. Derrida feels that Althusser has engaged in a “surreptitious borrowing” from Heidegger; that he has appropriated some of Heidegger’s thinking without taking the time to work through Heideggerian thought:

In that theoreticism that was also an epistemologism . . . it was

⁶ Derrida also speaks of Althusser in an interview in *Positions*; his discussion of Althusser there is largely elliptical but focuses on many of the same questions that I will address, specifically with regard to the limits of science, theory, and philosophy. These interviews were published, curiously enough, one year before Althusser’s book of the same title, *Positions*, was released in France.

indeed a matter of regions of objectivity, of regional ontologies as theories of objectivity without any question (of a Heideggerian type, for example) about the determination of the entity as object, about history, and the implications of this determination. The avoidance of making any of this explicit annoyed me in a way, especially since Althusser was always fascinated with Husserl and Heidegger without his having ever given any public sign for this fascination. (189-90)

Derrida thus sees in Althusser a borrowing of certain Heideggerian problems without any explicit acknowledgment of this debt and indeed without any rigorous investigation of the genealogy of these problems—that is, without reading Heidegger. It is in reference to Heidegger's work on science, technology, and "thought" beyond philosophy that Derrida frames some of his most trenchant criticisms of Althusser. Derrida appears deeply frustrated by Althusser's failure to speak about Heidegger when the latter's work would have been most useful and was already implicitly at stake.

Without going into the details of the Heideggerian project that Derrida suggests Althusser failed to engage, I will point to Derrida's points of contention along the border of the two oeuvres he is considering. As should be evident by now, I believe that Derrida's intervention can support much of the weight of the questions with which we began about the spatial rhetoric that so troubles Althusser in *Lire le Capital*. Derrida's objections to Althusser surround precisely the practice of defining the properly scientific object in a properly scientific field—a problem that bears on the borders of science and of thought more generally.

Until recently, I was under the impression that Derrida had never written any sustained analyses of Althusser. I have since been schooled otherwise by the Derrida archives, in which I located two significant texts in which Derrida discusses Althusser. These are not exactly "writings"; they are the typescripts that Derrida prepared for and read in his seminars on "le concept de l'idéologie chez les ideologues français" (which he conducted at the GREPH)⁷ and "Theorie et Pratique," from 1974-1975 and 75-76, respectively. Derrida devotes a full session of the GREPH seminar to a reading of Althusser's famous essay on "Ideology and Ideological State

⁷ Although this seminar was written for the École Normale, it was also presented at the GREPH. The first session of this seminar is published as "Where Does a Speaking Body Begin?" in *Who's Afraid of Philosophy: Right to Philosophy I*. The full seminar, as well as the following year's, are otherwise unpublished as of my writing.

Apparatuses,” paying particular attention to the rhetoric of “reproduction” that emerges there.⁸ More significantly for my project in this essay, the first five sessions of the seminar on *Théorie et Pratique* concern the relation between these terms in Althusser's writings, most notably in *Pour Marx* (with briefer references to *Eléments de l'autocritique* and *Lenine et la philosophie*). The third session of the seminar comprises a close reading of “Aujourd'hui,” Althusser's introduction to *Pour Marx*. Through his reading, Derrida shows how Althusser's text argues “que l'instance du théorique est l'instance principale, le tribunal de dernière instance pour juger du caractère philosophique de la philosophie.” That is, a certain reduction of philosophy to the “theoretical” takes place in Althusser's work. “Theory” becomes the test for the self-responsibility of philosophy as a system that can rigorously account for its own production:

c'est le théorique qui décide en droit si une philosophie est bien une philosophie et si elle affronte comme elle le doit, c'est à dire théoriquement, l'épreuve de l'auto-responsabilité. Autrement dit rendre compte de soi, répondre de soi, pour la philosophie, c'est un geste, ce doit être un geste en dernière instance théorique, et le marxisme serait la seule philosophie qui réponde d'elle-même théoriquement, devant l'instance théorique.

“Theory” then becomes the name for philosophy's accounting for itself. Philosophy's most proper moment—when it, itself, accounts for its own possibility by answering for itself, is affirmed and produced by *l'instance théorique*, to the point where “le théorique se confond purement et simplement avec le philosophique.”

The fourth session of the seminar deals with, among other things, Althusser's definitions of “théorie,” “pratique théorique,” and “Théorie” as they are developed in “Sur la dialectique matérialiste.” Derrida carefully reads Althusser's definitions of these terms, showing how “la théorique” is defined in Althusser's essay as a scientific theoretical practice: “La théorique se définit par rapport à la scientificité.” Practice in general is defined by Althusser “comme travail de transformation productrice,” as productive human labor that transforms some “determinate given raw material into a material product” (*For Marx* 166). In a complex logic drawn from Spinoza,⁹

⁸ This question might be productively linked to the work of Michèle Barrett and other Marxist feminists who argued that “reproduction” needed to be articulated more precisely in Althusser.

⁹ See Warren Montag's *Louis Althusser* for an excellent discussion of Althusser's inheritance of Spinoza's philosophy. See also *Essays in Self-Criticism* for Althusser's own discussion of the influence of Spinoza in *Pour Marx*.

Althusser argues that theoretical practice is the work of some “Generality II” (the unity of theoretical concepts and techniques through which a science poses itself questions) on some “Generality I” (the “matière première” which is never some “real object” but which always exists in the form of an ideological or prescientific generality). The Generality II transforms the Generality I into a Generality III, which is a concrete generality, a scientific concept, or “object of knowledge” that no longer remains ideological and that exists in the utterly new theoretical problematic of the science born out of the ideological break that separates any Generality I from the Generality III for which the former merely marked the spot. For example, we may recall from the earlier pages of this essay Althusser's remarks on “civil society” in Marx as an example of this process of theoretical practice. All of this is described in detail both in “Sur la dialectique matérialiste” and in Derrida's reading of the text in the fourth session of “Théorie et Pratique.”

Throughout his reading, Derrida queries Althusser's presupposition that theory, science, and philosophy are determined by a model of “practice” as transformative production. Althusser's text, Derrida writes,

marque irréversiblement l'antériorité, la primordialité du pratique sur le théorique, de l'état pratique sur l'état théorique, antériorité débordante puisqu'elle annonce déjà que le théorique reste un développement du pratique, une espèce de pratique, la pratique théorique en tant qu'elle produit des connaissances qui étaient déjà là à l'état pratique.

The force of Derrida's questioning builds toward an ultimate questioning of the nature of both “practice” and “theory” as acts of determinate human productive labor. This question of the determinate nature of theoretical practice will bear on my discussion of reading to come later, but for now let us continue to follow Derrida.

It is in the fifth session of the seminar that Derrida finally moves from a discussion of Althusser to one of Heidegger (to whom the remaining 4 sessions are devoted). This transition takes place by means of a discussion of Althusser's redefinition, in the 1970s, of philosophy as “class struggle in theory,” a welcome opening of philosophy beyond the strict borders of “theory” that contained it in *Pour Marx*. Derrida sees in Althusser a recognition of the performative nature of Marxist philosophical practice as a political gesture or act, as formed in relation to a set of practices that are not, strictly speaking, philosophical. I continue to cite Derrida at some length, since the original text is not easily accessible at present:

il est pourtant clair qu'au moment où [Althusser] définit le projet marxiste d'une nouvelle pratique de la philosophie, au moment où il définit la place de la philosophie (comme lutte des classes dans la théorie) le discours définissant n'est plus simplement celui de la philosophie se définissant ou se situant; d'autre part, ce discours définissant lui-même est aussi un acte, un geste politique, une pratique, ce n'est plus un langage purement théorique, ni même une pratique essentiellement théorique.

The act of defining philosophy, then, has a performative dimension irreducible to the constative claims of a purely theoretical practice. But it also exceeds the power of any philosophical performance; it is never guaranteed to secure philosophy in a successful performative. Philosophy *se déborde* in defining itself, it goes beyond itself, breaches its borders, but it is also *débordée*:

Le discours théorique ou philosophique, comme le discours en général, se déborde lui-même dans son opération. La définition althussérienne de la pratique marxiste de la philosophie entend déborder non seulement toute autre philosophie, toute l'histoire de la philosophie ainsi interprétable et transformable à partir d'une prise de parti dans la lutte des classes, mais elle entend déborder aussi le philosophique comme tel dès lors qu'il est défini et même situé dans un champ (par exemple la lutte des classes) qu'il ne domine pas, et qui est loin de se résumer à son instance philosophique. Philosophie débordée, donc.

That is, the Althusserian definition of Marxist philosophical practice seeks not only to undo every other, presumably “ideological” philosophy; it also breaches the borders surrounding the “philosophical as such” insofar as it is defined in relation to something that it does not control and that cannot be called properly philosophical. Thus philosophy is undone or overwhelmed in its most proper moment of self-definition:

Rien de plus philosophique que l'acte de définir ou de situer le philosophique dans le champ général de ce qui est, de l'être comme ceci ou cela, ici comme production ou comme pratique.

It is with regard to the borders of philosophy, at the moment of its self-definition, that Derrida turns to his reading of “thought” in Heidegger as that which haunts philosophy’s self-responsibility. The remaining sessions of the seminar read Heidegger’s work on metaphysics and technology in

relation to the problematic of “theory/practice” with which he began.

I am attempting in this essay to carry Derrida’s intervention into the Althusserian project further into the crisis of spatiality that we found in *Lire le Capital*. While I am in part reading Althusser according to Derrida’s indications, I am also following a different movement in Althusser’s work, that of reading. Althusser insists in *Lire le Capital* that there is no such thing as an innocent reading: “il n’est toutefois pas de lecture innocente” (10). Perhaps this statement, which remains primarily gestural in Althusser’s early work (although it is fleshed out in *Eléments de l'autocritique* when philosophy is redefined as “class struggle in the field of theory”), registers the impossibility of a rigorously bounded, “infinitely definite” theory precisely because reading crosses the theoretical field, opening it to some outside that is not entirely its own.

It is part of my task in this essay to relate this maxim, that there is no such thing as an innocent reading, to Althusser’s model of symptomatic reading as a scientific operation, and to consider how his theory might be challenged by Derrida’s consideration of the limitations of this thinking of science. To this end, I will turn back to the text of Althusser’s that has had the greatest bearing on my reading of him: “Du «Capital» à la philosophie de Marx,” a text which Derrida never analyzed, even if, in a manner as yet illegible to me, he still “gave some public sign” of a reading.

III. L’espace de la lecture

The notion of symptomatic reading that Althusser develops in “Du «Capital» à la philosophie de Marx” is central to an understanding of the Althusserian system that became prominent in 1965 with the publication of both *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*. A great deal hinges on the mechanisms of symptomatic reading as a mode of theoretical practice: the location of a break between ideology and science, the specificity of Marxist philosophy, and an account of the method of the Althusserian project are all at stake in the possibility of *la lecture symptomale*. Put simply, “From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy” asks, in effect, by what mechanism Althusser’s own theoretical practice produces concepts or objects of knowledge much as Marx’s did. The answer is: through symptomatic reading.

The symptomatic reading of Marx’s work that Althusser and others undertake in *Lire le Capital* highlights “l’absence de ce concept (et de tous ses sous-concepts) *de l’efficace d’une structure sur ses éléments*, qui est la clé de voûte invisible-visible, absente-présente, de toute son œuvre” (30-1, emphasis

in original). That is, the Althusserian reading seeks to account for a particular theoretical problem, namely, that Marx lacks words for the very concept—that of the effectivity of a structure on its elements—that his work produces. Or, rather, Marx cannot recognize these concepts in the elements of the theoretical field with which he began.

Althusser thus calls our attention to the relation between the visible and invisible objects and problems in a given problematic. For Althusser, a symptomatic reading produces a break from the ideological when it sees what a theoretical field does but cannot see, what it produces but cannot describe. In the case of his transformation of political economy, Marx sees that Smith and Ricardo have produced concepts such as the labor theory of value and labor power. But the ideological field that produces these concepts cannot see this production; this is not because they have bad vision, but because these theoretical objects do not exist prior to their production. Likewise, Althusser insists that Marx produces, in *Capital*, a philosophy (dialectical materialism) quite alien to Hegelian dialectics, but he lacks the concepts to describe this production, concepts that emerge with the structuralist revolution of Althusser's own time.

Ellen Rooney has argued originally and persuasively that this element of Althusser's work—his theory and practice of reading—has been too often overlooked in the obsession (Rooney calls it a “fetish”) with Althusser's theory of ideology and his distinction between science and ideology:

The essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and the opposition between ideology and science, as it emerges in the course of *Reading “Capital,”* have dominated our response to Althusser's entire oeuvre in a remarkable and unproductive way, while the crucial place of reading has been obscured, even disavowed. (“Better Read Than Dead” 183)

I want to follow Rooney in a consideration of Althusser's theory and practice of reading before or alongside any consideration of his theory of ideology and its relation to science. I am not, however, as convinced as she that the Althusserian notion of “reading” can be considered aside from the fixed distinction between science and ideology. As Rooney points out, scientific practice is inextricably linked in *Lire le Capital* to “reading” in the broadest sense, a fact that might indeed complicate accusations against his work of “scientism.” But this linkage of science and reading also poses the question as to whether or not Althusser produces or attempts to produce a “science” or “Theory” (in his restricted senses of these terms) of reading, placing reading

on the side of science instead of allowing it to disrupt the science/ideology dichotomy. If, for Althusser, Marxist philosophy is the only philosophy that is not reducible to ideology precisely because it accounts theoretically for its own production, then the practice of symptomatic reading that Althusser sees in Marx would itself be a science for which Althusser's theory of symptomatic reading would be the (non-ideological) "philosophy." That is to say, Marx's readings of Hegel and the classical political economists are examples of the "science" of symptomatic reading, while Althusser's introduction outlines the "philosophy" or *Théorie* of this particular theoretical practice. Viewed in this light, the model of symptomatic reading does little to disrupt the Althusserian system that posits science and ideology as opposite sides of a definite epistemological break. But, as we already have seen, things are not quite so simple, and the "non-scientific" cannot be left behind so easily.

As Rooney argues, "in his model, reading is the activity that keeps 'science' alive, where science is understood as the continuous and 'endless' project of disrupting ideologies" (185). Rooney points then, in a footnote, to a moment in Althusser's *Eléments de l'autocritique* where he argues that "theory/science emerges from its ideological prehistory not once, at its inception, but repeatedly, and it 'continues endlessly to do so (its prehistory remains always contemporary)'" (*Essays* 185 n.4). This may be an inverse way of saying, as he famously did in "Contradiction et surdétermination," that "the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes" (*For Marx* 113). In other words, according to the self-critical Althusser, the relation of science to ideology is never one of overcoming, it is never an absolute or clean "break." All of this is in stark contrast to Althusser's frequent claims regarding "epistemological breaks" within Marx's oeuvre in *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*. Yet there are hints of the messiness of the narrative of the break throughout these works, as well.

Althusser's description and performance of *la lecture symptomale* ("symptomatic reading") is one of the locations of this alternately messy and clean break, and its flickering contours are of considerable import for thinking scientific knowledge and its relation to its objects. Althusser draws his theory and practice of symptomatic reading from Marx's reading of classical political economy in *Capital*. He describes Marx's reading of classical political economy (named "Smith-Ricardo") as "a double reading": "En réalité, la lecture que Marx fait de Smith-Ricardo (je les prendrai ici pour exemple) est, à y regarder de près, assez singulière. C'est une lecture

double, — ou plutôt une lecture qui met en oeuvre deux principes de lecture radicalement différents” (*Lire* 16). But the “radical difference” between these two principles of reading deconstructs itself in Althusser’s text, even as it is stubbornly insisted upon. This dissolution and redrawing of the lines between the first and second reading is part of the same movement that renders “science” and “ideology” ultimately inextricable even as it must keep them apart. It is also part of the same movement that denounces the spatial metaphor even as it continually has recourse to it. As I will argue, this is one movement of symptomatic reading that Althusser disavows, and it is precisely the moment of an allegorization that is alternately, or simultaneously, a spatialization and a temporalization (or, to use Derrida’s phrase, a spacing). But we are getting ahead of ourselves; first, let’s recount Althusser’s narrative of the first and second readings.

The first reading that Althusser locates in Marx involves “a single logic of sighting and oversight,” and works with “la logique d’une conception de la connaissance où tout le travail de la connaissance se réduit, en son principe, à la reconnaissance du simple rapport de la vision ; où toute la nature de son objet se réduit à la simple condition du donné.” That is, the “objects” that Marx “sees” are, prior to the activity of reading, given and visible, and Smith is thus accused of a failure of vision: “Ce qui Smith n’a pas vu, par une défaillance du voir, Marx le voit: ce que Smith n’a pas vu était bel et bien visible, et c’est parce qu’il était visible, que Smith a pu ne pas le voir, et que Marx peut le voir.” Althusser points to the limitations of the “single logic” of visibility:

Nous sommes au rouet : retombés dans le mythe spéculaire de la connaissance comme vision d’un objet donné, ou lecture d’un texte établi, qui ne sont jamais que la transparence même, — tout le péché d’aveuglement, comme toute la vertu de clairvoyance appartenant de plein droit au voir, — à l’œil de l’homme. . . . Et nous voici nous, enfin, convoqués au même destin de la vision, — condamnés à ne voir dans Marx que ce qu’il a vu. (17)

This first reading, and the logic of vision that orders it, are inadequate to the formation of a science, precisely because “reading” here is only the recognition of objects that were already knowable as such and transparently visible—all of the marks of the “religious myth of reading” that Althusser decries.

In contradistinction to the understanding of knowledge (or of

theoretical practice) implied by this “first,” ideological reading, Althusser locates in Marx a second reading, one that rises to the level of a science.¹⁰ Althusser insists that “there is in Marx a second quite different reading, with nothing in common with the first” (19):

Il y a pourtant une petite, une toute petite différence [between the first reading and the second], que, j'en avertis aussitôt le lecteur, nous n'avons nullement l'intention de ne pas voir! La voici : ce que l'économie politique classique ne voit pas, ce n'est pas ce qu'elle ne voit pas, c'est ce qu'elle voit ; ce n'est pas ce qui lui manque, c'est au contraire ce qui ne lui manque pas ; ce n'est pas ce qu'elle rate, c'est au contraire ce qu'elle ne rate pas. La bévue, c'est alors de ne pas voir ce qu'on voit, la bévue porte non plus sur l'objet, mais sur la vue même. La bévue est une bévue qui concerne le voir : le ne pas voir est alors intérieur au voir, il est une forme du voir, donc dans un rapport nécessaire avec le voir. (20)

The ideological first reading, then, is not blind because it fails to see all objects; its blindness results from its incapacity to see what it has produced. This incapacity follows from an inability to conceive of (its) knowledge as the production of a field of visibility and invisibility, failing to see how it includes its invisible in the act of excluding it and to see what it does but does not see. To use the language of “On the Young Marx,” this first reading cannot account for its own production as knowledge because it takes the objects it sees as given rather than as produced; as such it cannot see whatever else it produces. The second reading, in contrast, understands its blindness as a condition of seeing, as part of the production of knowledge that it must include in the act of excluding. “This identity of non-vision and vision in vision” is possible only if we see knowledge as a production, according to Althusser.

L'invisible est défini par le visible comme son invisible, son inderdit de voir : l'invisible n'est donc pas simplement, pour reprendre la métaphore spatiale, le dehors du visible, les ténèbres intérieures de l'exclusion, intérieures au visible même, puisque définie par la structure du visible. (26)

What distinguishes the second reading (and science and theory and, in this case, philosophy) from the first (ideological) reading, is its capacity for self-

¹⁰ He does not actually use these terms (“ideology” and “science”) to identify the two readings respectively, but I believe that the parallel is one of identity and not mere analogy.

reflection, for recognizing that it has indeed produced the objects through a partial vision that also produces its blind spots. The second reading is able to account for its own production, which is precisely what Althusser means when he talks here about knowledge as a production. Science takes concepts or objects that are “given” and, through the labor of science, produces new objects the conditions of which (conditions here meaning relations of contradiction or overdetermination) it can account for as part of its field of vision and nonvision.

All that said, I cannot follow Althusser when he says that the second reading has “nothing in common” with the first. The two readings are temporalized in a peculiar manner that perhaps would best be understood as a sort of allegory of reading, to use Paul de Man’s term. That is to say, since Althusser’s account of *la lecture symptomale* is split into a first and second reading, what we have here is a classic allegorization of reading, a text ready-made for de Manian deconstruction:

What is at stake here is the possibility of including the contradictions of reading in a narrative that would be able to contain them. Such a narrative would have the universal significance of an allegory of reading. (*Allegories* 72)

De Man¹¹ might say that in representing the unverifiable or non-phenomenal (the “labor” of reading), Althusser’s text is necessarily marked by an aporia between cognitive and performative registers of language, between what he states about spatial rhetoric and his constant use of it.¹²

De Man’s work can help us to consider how the allegory of reading—as temporally divided and as spatialized—that Althusser writes in *Lire le Capital* might well be the effect of an irreducible non-scientificity: “Criticism is a metaphor for the act of reading, and this act is itself inexhaustible” (*Blindness* 107). This provocative claim introduces an indeterminate process at the origin of any “theory” of reading, a process that is not necessarily reducible to theoretical practice (the transformation-

¹¹ Even more striking, perhaps, are the similarities between Althusser’s version of “symptomatic reading” and the model of critical reading that de Man elaborates in *Blindness and Insight*. De Man argues in this essay that, in critical discourse, “The insight exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right. . . . To write critically about critics thus becomes a way to reflect on the paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision that has to be rectified by means of insights that it unwittingly provides” (106). The similarities between this model of critical reading and that provided by Althusser in *Lire le Capital* are remarkable, although the trajectories and geneses of their respective *oeuvres* are starkly different. Rooney also notes this similarity in a footnote (“Better” 187 n.9).

¹² Cf. “Semiology and Rhetoric” in *Allegories of Reading* for de Man’s most succinct formulation of this feature of all texts.

production of generalities) and that thus cannot necessarily be accounted for by “a theory of theoretical practice.” Yet reading remains a necessary point of reference; it cannot be ignored, as it is the critical operation that provides science with the possibility of breaking with ideology in the first place. All the same, a theoretical definition of reading as a linear and sequential theoretical practice is a doomed endeavor.

This impossibility is related at bottom to what Derrida calls *espacement*, or spacing, a key concept throughout his work. *Espacement* names the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, the fact of *différance* that renders any self-identity or absolute self-presence impossible and that haunts all difference and repetition of the same. In the essay on “*Différance*,” Derrida shows how the French verb *différer* signifies both in temporal terms (i.e. to defer) and in the spatial terms through which discrete terms are understood in relation to each other. He deconstructs any absolute distinction between the two senses, arguing that any “present” is constituted by means of a trace of that which it is not:

Il faut qu'un intervalle le sépare de ce qui n'est pas lui pour qu'il soit lui-même, mais cet intervalle qui constitue en présent doit aussi du même coup diviser le présent en lui-même, partageant ainsi, avec le présent, tout ce qu'on peut penser à partir de lui. . . . C'est intervalle se constituant, se divisant dynamiquement, c'est ce qu'on peut appeler *espacement*, devenir-espace du temps ou devenir-temps de l'espace. (“*La Différance*” 13-4)

This thinking of *différance* would interrupt any thinking of a problematic that is infinite because definite, enclosed within its boundaries within any border that is not purely “inside” itself. In other words, were a “theoretical field” not always already made possible by some *espacement*, if it had absolutely no relation to “the spatial metaphor,” then how could science happen at all, how could knowledge be thought as a production, as Althusser insists it must be? Without a minimal thinking of *espacement* as this becoming-space of time and becoming-time of space, how could Althusser’s model of symptomatic reading be possible at all? How could any reading ever get from the “first” to the “second” level without this “interval” of *espacement*, an interval that undoes the consistency and self-presence of the problematic to itself and thus makes possible its mutability? I would suggest, then, that Althusser’s recourse to an unwelcome spatial rhetoric is inextricable from the allegorical rhetoric according to which *la lecture*

symptomale would proceed chronologically to break with its ideological past. It is the working of a fundamental espacement that knots together these two rhetorical gestures.

This allegorization and espacement of reading plays out in “Du *Capital* à la philosophie de Marx” and has tremendous implications for many of the other critical operations therein, most significantly the distinction between science and ideology. Just after the point in the text with which this essay began, when Althusser regrets the effects of the spatial metaphor, he insists that the definition of the field is a properly and distinctly scientific operation:

Sa définition (opération scientifique par excellence) est alors ce qui le fait à la fois infini dans son genre, et marqué au-dedans de soi, en toutes ses déterminations, par ce qu'exclut de lui en lui sa définition même. Et lorsqu'il advient qu'en certaines circonstances critiques très particulières, le développement des questions produites par la problématique (ici le développement des questions de l'économie politique s'interrogeant sur la "valeur du travail") aboutit à produire la présence fugitive d'un aspect de son invisible dans le champ visible de la problématique existante, — ce produit ne peut être alors qu'invisible, puisque la lumière du champ le traverse en aveugle sans se réfléchir sur lui. Cet invisible se dérobe alors en qualité de lapsus, d'absence, de manque ou de symptôme théoriques. Il se manifeste comme ce qu'il est, précisément invisible pour la théorie—et c'est pourquoi Smith commet sa "bévue." (27)

Thus, for Althusser, science inherits a delimited field from the ideology that gives birth to it, but the definition of this delimitation is a purely scientific operation. The second reading in the symptomatic reading is able to see what the ideology that spawns it produced and did but did not see. Theoretical objects exist in relation to the problematic in which they are formed or “delineated,” and they become scientific when this production can be accounted for through rigorous “definition.” The question that must be posed here is whether this definition can be cut so cleanly from the ideological delimitation that it responds to and inherits. More specifically, are the objects produced by a science really produced in an entirely scientific manner, or are they also still inherited from ideology? How does science inherit its objects and concepts from ideology even as it produces them in new relations? This movement cannot proceed without some *différance* or

spacing of the problematic itself.

As Althusser himself would later argue in *Eléments de l'autocritique*, every science is a science of the ideology, but the line dividing these two modes of discourse is never guaranteed to stay in place. *Lire le Capital* implies that the location of this division is always redrawn in reading. But does theory read? Althusser's recourse to the rhetoric of reading in effect destabilizes the science of reading that he wishes to produce, precisely because the second reading is entirely dependent upon the first and never escapes it or cuts itself off entirely, much as no science cuts itself off from ideology. For Althusser, the delimitation is ideologically determined; every science receives its objects from ideology or from another science, but it is not scientific until it accounts for them as part of a system of objects and concepts. Science reads these objects and transforms them, it even produces or reproduces them, but never by cutting itself off from the ideology that gives birth to it. Thus science, as described by Althusser, is never quite the science that he wants it to be:

que nous soyons conviés à penser d'une façon toute nouvelle le rapport de la science à l'idéologie dont elle naît, et qui continue plus ou moins de l'accompagner sourdement dans son histoire; qu'une telle recherche nous mette en face de ce constat que toute science ne peut être, dans son rapport avec l'idéologie dont elle sort, pensée que comme «science de l'idéologie», voilà qui pourrait nous déconcerter, si nous n'étions prévenus de la nature de l'objet de la connaissance, qui ne peut exister que dans la forme de l'idéologie lorsque se constitue la science qui va en produire, sur le mode spécifique qui la définit, la connaissance.
(53)

Scientific objects, then, which are objects of knowledge, can only exist in the form of ideology at the moment that science, which is always a “science of the ideology” constitutes them. This doesn't say very much about scientific objects if we believe that science can cut itself off from ideology, that reading can proceed by abandoning the text that it responds to. But if every science is thought as a science of the ideology, read with the ambivalence of the genitive, then scientific objects would have to remain in a constitutive relation to ideology that cannot be ushered away by the narrative of a “first” and “second” reading, sequentially related but utterly broken apart. If we follow Althusser's assertion that “science's prehistory remains always contemporary,” then we have to understand and read his discourse regarding

the “theory of reading” through this lens, recognizing the espacement of reading. Where and when is the moment of scientific production that is announced by theory, by Althusser's own theoretical apparatuses, in the *coup de théâtre* of a symptomatic reading? What is the interval that separates the theoretical fields on either side of an epistemological break? This narrative of a break across time necessarily brings to light the irreducible espacement of every “theory.”

If reading names a response to some original text, its production can only continue to respond to its outside, beyond any pure self-responsibility. We would do well to recall here Derrida's reflections on a *philosophie débordée*: the definition of philosophy always places philosophy beside itself, obeying the law of a primordial espacement that cannot be willed away through a purely temporal schema (first one mode of production, now the other). As if the condition of this temporalization were not itself a certain relationality in space, a placement of philosophy beside itself through a reading that always redoubles it. *Une lecture débordée*, then, is what Althusser cannot help but inscribe.

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